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ALTERNATIVE LAND REFORM
PROPOSALS IN THE 1930s: THE
NASHVILLE AGRARIANS AND THE
SOUTHERN TENANT FARMERS' UNION

To appraise the South is to appraise farmers, whether
for the art of living or for the lack of a living.

—Herman Clarence Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*

With the current trends in U.S. agriculture coming under increasing fire, it is worth recalling an earlier debate on the future of American farming and rural society.¹ As in so many areas of contemporary life, agricultural policy today derives largely from the New Deal. Public policy arouses controversy since practically every government decision produces losers as well as winners, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's commercial farm program was more controversial than most. It inspired several alternative proposals. We shall examine the programmatic statements put forth by two quite different representatives of the rural South, the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Although their ideas were never really implemented, these dissenting

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¹ For a sample of the recent criticism, see Michael Perelman, *Farming for Profit in a Hungry World: Capital and the Crisis in Agriculture* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1977); Richard D. Rodefeld et al., eds., *Change in Rural America: Causes, Consequences, and Alternatives* (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1978); Frederick H. Buttel and Howard Newby, eds., *The Rural Sociology of the Advanced Societies: Critical Perspectives* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1980); and National Agricultural Lands Study, *Where Have the Farm Lands Gone?* (Washington: GPO, 1981).

voices deserve to be heard because they offered fundamentally different visions to the New Deal.

Such options seem especially relevant in light of a recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In *A Time to Choose*, former Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland reviews the negative consequences of farm policy over the past half-century and concludes that a major reevaluation, similar to that of the thirties, is now in order: "Our agriculture today is at a crossroads. . . . Perhaps the most critical of the far-reaching choices is to explicitly decide, what structure of agriculture do we want to attain and to perpetuate?"² "Structure of agriculture" includes farm size, type of organization (family, corporate, cooperative), distribution of farm income and wealth, particularly the control and ownership of land. On these issues the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union may have something to say to us after all.

The Nashville Agrarians were a loose-knit coterie of writers who abhorred the New South's "vulgar industrialism." They upheld for the region another prospect, based on the stability of the past. Their first symposium, *I'll Take My Stand*, exalted art, nature, leisure, and religion, which they thought were best preserved below the Potomac. Twelve young Southerners, all but two associated with Vanderbilt University, launched this assault on modernity. Eight were men of letters; four were historians or social scientists.³ Beginning as a cultural reaction to the relatively prosperous 1920s, their critique soon broadened to encompass many social and economic issues of the thirties. These humanists decried corporate capitalism as well as fascism and communism. While conceding that science and technology had a proper labor-saving role to play, they argued that a reliance on industrialization led to

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, *A Time to Choose: Summary Report on the Structure of Agriculture* (Washington: GPO, 1981), 147, 152.

³ The Agrarians were a very diverse lot. They all subscribed to only one document, the introductory "Statement of Principles" in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930; reprint ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977). On any given issue, there was likely to be no single "Agrarian" position. They even lack an agreed-upon name, some calling them the "Southern" or "Vanderbilt Agrarians." The moving spirits were three "Fugitive Poets" of the 1920s—John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate—along with historian Frank Lawrence Owsley. Closest to this inner circle were Lyle H. Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, John Donald Wade, and Robert Penn Warren. Herman Clarence Nixon, a friend of Owsley and Davidson, had an ambiguous relationship to the rest. John Gould Fletcher, Henry Blue Kline, and Stark Young had least contact with the others. In the latter thirties, Ransom, Tate, Warren, and "second-generation" Agrarian Cleanth Brooks formalized a new approach to the study of literature, the "New Criticism." (Interviews with Cleanth Brooks, Northford, Conn., 18 September 1976; Lyle Lanier, Washington, D.C., 6 August 1976; John T. Nixon, Nashville, Tenn., 11 March 1977; Allen Tate, Nashville, Tenn., 10 August 1976; and R. P. Warren, New Haven, Conn., 16 September 1976).

alienation, overproduction, unemployment, the maldistribution of wealth, an irrational consumer society, and the threat of global war. They published over two hundred "Agrarian" essays during the decade, culminating in a joint effort with other decentralists, *Who Owns America?* But after 1936 their social criticism dropped off, as the core members resumed their original literary calling. Yet, for a while, believing in the wide distribution of real property, the Agrarians advocated the return of family businesses and diversified farms. They desired, as one historian says, a "peaceful, middle-class revolution," one seeking a revived sense of tradition in the face of ever-advancing progress.⁴

In stark contrast stood another agrarian group. Protesting the inequities of New Deal agricultural policy, Socialists and landless farmers in northeastern Arkansas organized the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). Despite violent reactions from plantation owners who realized the threat posed by such interracial cooperation, the union quickly spread throughout the Arkansas Delta and into Oklahoma and Missouri. The STFU mounted a successful cottonpickers' strike in 1935, when it claimed 25,000 members. Locally the organization sought written tenure contracts, better educational opportunities, public welfare benefits, and the right to grow home gardens. Assisted by progressive

⁴ Edward S. Shapiro, "Decentralist Intellectuals and the New Deal," *Journal of American History* 58 (March 1972): 938. Shapiro's "The American Distributists and the New Deal" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968) is the best study of the Agrarians' social and economic thought, although it lumps them together with several other groups. The most detailed secondary source is Virginia J. Rock, "The Meaning and Making of *I'll Take My Stand*: A Study in Utopian-Conservatism, 1925-1939" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1961). See also Louis D. Rubin's latest interpretation, *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); and Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966). Intellectual historian Michael O'Brien provides a much-needed antidote to the dominance of studies by literary scholars; see "The Last Theologians: Recent Southern Literary Criticism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 17 (Summer 1978), and *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), which also treats regional sociologist Howard W. Odum. The best source, of course, is the Agrarians' own writings. Besides *I'll Take My Stand*, *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside, 1936), and their numerous individual books, eight of the more significant essays are collected by Robert M. Crunden in *The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture, 1900-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977). For recent reflections by two of the three surviving former Agrarians, see A. N. Lytle, "They Took Their Stand: The Agrarian View After Fifty Years," *Modern Age* 24 (Spring 1980); and R. P. Warren, "Can Democracy Survive in a World of Technology?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 18 August 1980, pp. 64-65. For a discussion of their last reunion, see "In Tennessee: The Last Garden," *Time*, 8 December 1980, pp. 10-17. (Following convention, we use upper-case *Agrarian* to identify the Nashville group and *agrarian* as the generic term implying land reform [defined below].)

groups throughout the country, the STFU also served as publicist for the plight of the sharecropper. Norman Thomas, head of the U.S. Socialist Party, generously supported the movement. One of his young Southern associates, H. L. Mitchell, led the STFU while another, Howard Kester, was its main intellectual spokesperson. Backed by the rank and file, they were instrumental in pressuring state governments and the Roosevelt Administration to enact tenant legislation. In 1937, the STFU joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations for an ill-fated year and a half of factionalism. By 1940, the croppers' union had lost the effectiveness of its two-pronged attack: grass-roots confrontation and national lobbying. It limped along through World War II and later became the National Farm Labor Union. In the mid thirties, though, the STFU, like the civil rights struggle twenty years later, was virtually a mass movement.⁵

What could these two groups—a small band of seemingly reactionary professors from Vanderbilt and a labor union of Socialist-led sharecroppers in the Delta—possibly have in common? Admittedly, most scholars have found little ground for comparison.⁶ Yet a closer look reveals that

⁵ The fullest work on the STFU is Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971). Also see his "Gardner Jackson, That 'Socialist' Tenant Farmers' Union, and the New Deal," *Agricultural History* 42 (April 1968); Norman Thomas, *The Plight of the Sharecropper*, 2d ed. (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1936); Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936); Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 836 (Washington: GPO, 1945); M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-37," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 1960); David E. Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Jerold S. Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers: Socialist Critics of the New Deal," *Labor History* 7 (Winter 1966); Mark D. Naison, "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO," *Radical America* 2 (September-October 1968); Naison, "Pilgrims of Justice; Claude and Joyce Williams," *Southern Exposure* 1 (1974); Sue Thrasher and Leah Wise, "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *ibid.* Mitchell has recently published his fascinating recollections, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979).

⁶ There are exceptions. In *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), Donald Holley gives a fair overview of the Nashville Agrarians (p. 22) while large portions of his book concern the STFU. Paul K. Conkin has most successfully summarized Nashville Agrarianism alongside the STFU as one representative of American socialism: see *The New Deal*, 2d ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), 54-55. Unlike other historians, Elizabeth Jacoway in *Yankee Missionaries in the South: The Penn School Experiment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) claims that Howard Kester "absorbed the philosophy of the Nashville Agrarians" although he denied it to her (pp. 242-43). He also denied it to us (Interview with Howard Kester, Black Mountain, Tenn., 8 August 1976), and we think the evidence is overwhelmingly in his favor—see note 32 below.

several of the Nashville Agrarians and the STFU leaders agreed, in very general terms, on two significant issues. First, their analyses of America's problems identified the same root cause (corporate, or "finance," capitalism) and, second, their prescriptions for change both centered on land reform. This article deals primarily with the latter; what makes the two groups comparable here is their common commitment to agrarianism.

Agrarianism is a conceptually slippery term. It is often taken as a synonym for "agriculture," or as a narrow set of cultural values about rural farm life, or even as an extremely individualistic stance toward private property in land. However, agrarianism, properly speaking, refers above all to beliefs and policies concerning the distribution of land, that is, to land tenure. It is of course related to agriculture and farming but identical with neither. Agrarianism means land reform, a redistribution of rights to the land, a more equitable access to this special form of property. Until the twentieth century, "agrarians" in both Europe and America were regarded as revolutionaries, dangerous to the existing order of society. As Paul Conkin notes, the "primary target of agrarian schemes throughout history has been large land-owners."⁷ Our thesis is that, in this precise sense, the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union were agrarian.

Both groups thought that a number of circumstances necessitated land reform. In the thirties, the rural Southern economy, like the nation as a whole, was in crisis. Rock-bottom farm prices were an immediate concern, but deeper problems persisted. Farm tenancy peaked in 1935: nearly half of the American farmers were landless. The condition was most prevalent—and desperate, particularly among blacks—in the South, where tenant families included eight million people, one-fourth of all Southerners. Related to this latter-day "peculiar institution" was absentee landlordism. One-third of the region's cotton land was owned by banks and insurance companies, many Northern-based. This led to the charge that the South suffered from being a colonial-type economy. The region exported cheap raw materials (farm products, minerals, timber) while importing manufactured goods.⁸ The Nashville Agrarians

⁷ Paul K. Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity: America's First Political Economists* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 224. See also Conkin, "Agrarianism," *Vanderbilt Today* 17 (July 1977): 3-5; and Thomas P. Govan, "Agrarian and Agrarianism: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Words," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (February 1964): 35-47.

⁸ Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and Will W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 33; Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932); Arthur F. Raper and Ira DeA. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941); George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967),

and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union opposed all these economic trends.⁹ The New Deal, of course, had its own solution to the "farm problem." The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 raised prices by restricting output, thus rescuing commercial farmers. By taking land out of production, however, the cotton section of the law exacerbated other problems such as displaced tenants whose landlords no longer needed them.¹⁰ Both Southern agrarian groups strongly criticized this program for encouraging scarcity instead of abundance, favoring large over small farms, and penalizing tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Nashville Agrarian H. C. Nixon and STFU representative Howard Kester even spoke of the legislation as tending toward Fascism.¹¹

The Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union issued similar critiques of New Deal farm policy. But they sprang from opposite ideological underpinnings. The Nashville group sought to *re-establish* a Jeffersonian society of individual, independent property-

409, 594. Chapter 1 of Paul E. Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty and New Deal Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), presents an overview of the excellent sociological studies of the rural South in the 1930s.

⁹ Andrew N. Lytle, "The Hind Tit," *I'll Take My Stand*; Donald Davidson, "That This Nation May Endure," *Who Owns America?*; Davidson, "Expeditors vs. Principles," *Southern Review* 2 (Spring 1937); Allen Tate, "A View of the Whole South," *American Review* 2 (February 1934); John Crowe Ransom, "Sociology and the Black Belt," *American Review* 4 (December 1934); F. L. Owsley, "A Key to Southern Liberalism," *Southern Review* 4 (Spring 1939); Herman C. Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), and Nixon, *Possum Trot: Rural Community, South* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941); Nixon to Davidson, 19 February 1934, The Donald Davidson Papers, Joint University Libraries, Nashville, Tenn.; Nixon to Owsley, 25 October 1935, The Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Joint University Libraries, Nashville, Tenn.

Kester, *Revolt Among Sharecroppers*; "A Statement Concerning Farm Tenancy Submitted to the [Arkansas] Governor's Commission on Farm Tenancy," 21 September 1936, The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter STFU Papers); Mitchell to Governor, 8 June 1936; "Legislative Program of the STFU of Oklahoma," 1 March 1937; Mitchell, "Land and Liberty for Mexican Farmers," 1-6 July 1939, all in STFU Papers; Kester, "Statement to U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Unemployment and Relief," March 1938, The Howard A. Kester Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹⁰ Conkin, *New Deal*, 39-40; Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 20-44.

¹¹ Ransom, "What Does the South Want?" *Who Owns America?*, 188; Davidson, "A Case in Farming," *American Review* 3 (September 1934): 530; Davidson, "I'll Take My Stand: A History," *American Review* 5 (Summer 1935): 310-11; Lytle to Seward Collins, quoted in Shapiro, "Decentralist Intellectuals," 943; Nixon, *Forty Acres*, 82, 94; Nixon, "Statement Submitted at the Public Hearing on Cotton Program, AAA, Chisca Hotel, Memphis, 12 October 1935," reprinted in *Possum Trot*, 173; Nixon, *Social Security for Southern Farmers*, Southern Policy Committee Paper No. 2 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 4. Mitchell, "A Program for Action," November 1934; "Resolution on Land," Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Convention, Little Rock, Ark., 3-5 January 1936; "Legislative Program," all in STFU Papers; Kester, *Revolt Among Sharecroppers*, 26-33.

owners, one comprised substantially of a single class that did not face all the divisions and conflicts endemic to industrialism. The STFU leaders also despised the existing economic order but, as Socialists, looked *forward* to transcending the private property system altogether, toward the cooperative commonwealth. Both, then, opposed modern capitalism (which requires at least two classes, private owners of productive property and wage laborers) from different angles. The Agrarians and the STFU thus held up divergent ideals, often best articulated in their various land reform proposals.

In the depths of the Great Depression, 1932–1933, Agrarian John Crowe Ransom published his ideas on land reform. He offered a solution to the unemployment crisis: the jobless should return to the land as subsistence farmers, meeting as many of their own needs as they possibly could. Ransom encouraged those already farming to favor subsistence over cash crops. He argued that the best relief program was the wide distribution of small farms rather than welfare payments and public works. As a model for the United States, Ransom used Denmark, where the government financed land purchases by the indigent. According to Ransom, commercial agriculture in America could never achieve stability because of worldwide overproduction and the consequent uncertainty in export markets. Subsistence farmers were preferable since they did not depend on cash crops and would not lose land through debt foreclosures. Ransom urged that the federal government undertake a number of steps: heavy taxes on commercial farmers and agribusinessmen; lower taxes on small operators; maximum parity prices to the smaller farmers; a reorientation of the state agricultural schools and experiment stations toward subsistence farming; and homestead grants along with technical supervision to the unemployed.¹²

In 1935, Frank Owsley published an extensive land-reform proposal, "The Pillars of Agrarianism." He circulated the essay to most of the other Agrarians, who endorsed it. Owsley's first pillar was to rehabilitate the farm population. To achieve this goal, he suggested that

the national and state governments buy up all the lands owned by insurance companies and absentee landlords—which are being destroyed rapidly by erosion—and part of the land owned by the large planters who are struggling to save a portion of their lands, and give every tenant who can qualify, 80 acres of land, build him a substantial hewn log house and barn, fence him off twenty acres for a pasture, give him two mules and two milk cows, and advance him \$300 for his living expenses for one year. . . . An outright gift of

¹² Ransom, "Land!" *Harper's*, July 1932, pp. 216–24; "The State and the Land," *New Republic*, 17 February 1932, pp. 8–10; "Happy Farmers," *American Review* 4 (October 1933): 513–35.

land is advocated to the homesteader with one condition attached: the land must never be sold or mortgaged and when abandoned it should automatically escheat to the state which should be under immediate obligation to rehabilitate another worthy family.¹³

Owsley estimated that 500,000 tenant farmers a year could be helped through this policy. In addition, he urged that unemployed city dwellers be given land, or supervised as tenants until ready for ownership. Owsley's second and third pillars were soil rehabilitation and crop diversification, to be accomplished via stringent governmental controls on land use. The fourth pillar was an equilibrium between industry and agriculture through either higher protective tariffs for crops or parity pricing. The establishment of a regional form of government, to prevent the exploitation of one region by another, was Owsley's fifth and final pillar. A year later, Owsley restated the plan.¹⁴ These proposals by the two Vanderbilt professors were agrarian in the strict sense of the word; they sought to redistribute agricultural land to the poor.

Aside from the "use-and-occupancy-title-to-land" rhetoric in its constitution, the early Southern Tenant Farmers' Union was more concerned with simple survival than restructuring the nation's land tenure system. Toward the end of 1935, however, Memphis Socialist William Amberson drafted a land-reform proposal, a revision of which appeared as "A New Homestead Law" at the STFU's convention in January 1936. The conference resolution approving the proposed bill revived the Populist claim that "land is the common heritage of the people" and demanded that all farming families be guaranteed rights to the soil. Then the radical nature of the document became clear: "The title to all land shall be held in perpetuity by the people of the United States."¹⁵ It proposed a National Agricultural Land Authority (NALA) which would acquire and control all American farmland except that belonging to working farmers with less than 160 acres or to cooperative farms. NALA would pay for the socialized cropland through twenty-year bonds, with no person receiving over \$100,000 compensation. The central authority would insure abundant food and fiber by introducing machinery throughout U.S. agriculture, retiring submarginal lands, relocating farmers, storing surpluses, and overseeing labor relations. Land would be made available on ninety-nine-year leases to both family farm-

¹³ Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," *American Review* 4 (March 1935): 537.

¹⁴ Owsley, "The Old South and the New," *American Review* 6 (February 1936): 475-85.

¹⁵ "Resolution on Land"; for Amberson's original proposal, see the draft of "A New Homestead Law," 20 November 1935, STFU Papers.

ers and cooperatives, rent being one-fourth of the crop for the first twenty-five years and lowered thereafter to cover NALA's expenses, with surpluses accruing to the lessees. The authority would issue purchase loans for livestock and tools, which would become the personal property of the lessees, while fixed assets remained public. No land could be sold or mortgaged. The convention resolution concluded by announcing a conference of other farm organizations and labor unions in February to finalize the measure. The STFU adopted as its slogan, "Land for the Landless!" The chief objective of this proposal was to guarantee widespread access to the land. In a draft of a statement to President Roosevelt, the STFU maintained: "We can build our own houses, or even live in tents for the first few years until our crops begin to come in. We are willing to endure almost any privation if only we can get land upon which our tenure is secure."¹⁶

That the union saw nationalization as the best path to rural security seems primarily due to its Socialist origins. Norman Thomas had long advocated socialized agriculture. Unlike the Socialist Party leader, who preferred large-scale cooperative farming to individual homesteads, as well as its own later collectivist position, this early land-reform proposal of the STFU gave equal emphasis to individual leaseholds. The balanced position of the New Homestead Law was probably influenced by a mid-1935 questionnaire which polled 500 union members. Over half preferred a chance to own their own farms via government loans. Individual long-term leases from the government (as the bill proposed) received more votes than cooperative leases, which in turn placed above the existing year-to-year system. Consequently, in early 1936, the official STFU stance expressed no clear preference for cooperatives over small farms as a means of securing land tenure.¹⁷

Obviously, the STFU land-reform bill aimed at fundamental change. Through nationalization, leases, and planning, it attacked the traditional American ideal of fee simple ownership as well as the more recent federal program fostering scarcity. The measure was introduced in Congress, where such agrarian notions were considered far too drastic. Yet there was a curious lack of promotion for the New Homestead Law during the next year, when the STFU became most involved in formulating tenant legislation. The February conference was never held. While later statements advocated wholesale government purchase and leasing of land, none referred to NALA or nationalization. Thus, the

¹⁶ Undated Folder, 1935, STFU Papers.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Norman Thomas, *America's Way Out: A Program for Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 182; and Thomas, *As I See It* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 200.

proposal that Mitchell would later call the STFU's "most significant contribution" was stillborn.¹⁸

The period of radical land-reform schemes was ending, to be superseded by the more prosaic "dance of legislation."¹⁹ But not before FDR had created one of the New Deal's most remarkable agencies, the Resettlement Administration. Headed by Rexford Tugwell, the agency's main programs were land-use planning, resettlement communities, and rural rehabilitation. The Resettlement Administration was America's first war on rural poverty, but it only scratched the surface of the problems.²⁰ Although this agency came closest to implementing the land-reform proposals of both the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, it was hardly close enough for either.

In spring 1935, Senator John Bankhead of Alabama and Representative Marvin Jones of Texas introduced a bill to make low-interest, long-term loans to tenants, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers allowing them to purchase farms. The exact provisions of the proposal did not remain constant, but for the next two years the "Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill" was the focal point for land-reform efforts in America.²¹

The Nashville Agrarians held differing views on the Bankhead-Jones bill, some endorsing it totally, others wanting it modified. But, on the whole, no piece of legislation better promised to realize their hopes for the rural South. Frank Owsley and H. C. Nixon were particularly active in their support. In March 1935, Owsley wrote Senator Bankhead, suggesting that he sponsor a bill similar to his proposals in "The Pillars of Agrarianism," which had just appeared. Bankhead, who had already seen Owsley's essay, wrote back: "I read your article 'Pillars of Agrarian-

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 126-27; Interview with H. L. Mitchell, Montgomery, Ala., 11 August 1976. There are two identifiable reasons why the STFU might have dropped its "nationalization" plan. Gardner Jackson, the union's representative in Washington, advised that "pressure for such a completely revolutionary bill at such a time as this is bad tactics"; he suggested concentrating attention instead on perfecting the Bankhead-Jones farm tenant bill (Jackson to Mitchell, 15 January 1936, STFU papers). Secondly, the national newspaper of the Socialist Party, the *Socialist Call*, soon claimed that the Party had drafted the nationalization proposal for the STFU. Mitchell dashed off an angry letter of protest to Norman Thomas, saying that such a false statement "will probably ruin all chances of [the bill] getting consideration from other groups and it leaves the STFU in the position of being incapable of acting as an independent organization" (Mitchell to Thomas, 14 January 1936, STFU Papers).

¹⁹ Woodrow Wilson's phrase, quoted in Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 126.

²⁰ Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 84-86, 146-56, 170-81; Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 86-122, 153-55; Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 45-92.

²¹ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 132-40.

ism' and was very much interested in it. Since early in the depression I have firmly believed that the only sound and permanent remedy to our over-crowded conditions in the industrial centers must be found in a back-to-the-land movement."²² Owsley also corresponded with the other senator from Alabama, Hugo Black, who wrote:

Your article . . . has been read with much interest. Many of the ideas included in this article have been advanced in 'I'll Take My Stand.' Perhaps with most of the arguments presented by you I am in thorough accord. . . . Perhaps the bill recently offered by Senator Bankhead is the most forward step we can hope to take at the present time, to return the land of the South to individual owners.²³

In addition to these personal letter-writing efforts, Owsley and other Agrarians promoted the Bankhead-Jones bill through the Southern Policy Committee (SPC). At its first meeting in 1935, Owsley, Nixon, and T. J. Cauley presented a paper advocating passage of the Bankhead proposal. The entire conference, also attended by Donald Davidson, endorsed the legislation. Cauley, representing the Nashville Agrarians, argued the case for self-sufficient farming as a viable alternative to commercial agriculture. That summer, the SPC mounted a letter campaign to every U.S. Senator urging passage of the bill "as the most constructive piece of land legislation yet introduced."²⁴ Further, four Agrarians wired Senator Ellison D. "Cotton Ed" Smith that, if Bankhead-Jones failed, "the South faces a period of increasing poverty and class antagonism which will be capitalized by agitators and demagogues."²⁵

²² Owsley to Bankhead, 12 March 1935; Bankhead to Owsley, 15 March 1935, Owsley Papers.

²³ Black to Owsley, 26 March 1935, Owsley Papers.

²⁴ Quoted in Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 147; *Southern Policy*, Report of the Southern Policy Conference in Atlanta, 25-28 April 1935 (n.p., 1935), 16. The Southern Policy Committee, a branch of the National Policy Committee, was a politically liberal advocacy organization led by Francis Pickens Miller and H. C. Nixon; see Miller's autobiography, *Man from the Valley: Memoirs of a 20th-Century Virginian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 79-83; and Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 142-45. Incidentally, the SPC provided the forum for the most public and heated exchange between representatives of the Nashville Agrarians (Allen Tate) and the STFU (William Amberson), as reported in Jonathan Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 80-88. Owsley dissented from this somewhat anti-Agrarian (unfortunately the sole published) version of the confrontation; see "Mr. Daniels Discovers the South," *Southern Review* 4 (Spring 1939): 670. See also R. P. Warren to Owsley, 16 February 1939, Owsley Papers; Interviews with Warren to Owsley, 16 February 1939, Owsley Papers; Interviews with Warren, 1976; William T. Couch, Chapel Hill, N.C., 21 July 1976; and Arthur F. Raper, Oakton, Va., 24 July 1976.

²⁵ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 148n. Baldwin here mistakenly attributes *Agrarianism: A Program for Farmers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935) to Owsley; T. J. Cauley wrote this tract of Agrarian economics.

Agrarians Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, H. C. Nixon, and supporter Herbert Agar attended the second SPC meeting in 1936. Since the Bankhead-Jones bill had been held up in Congress for almost a year, it remained a matter of prime concern to the conference. For reasons of "greater security and opportunity to the agricultural classes," the delegates again recommended passage of tenant legislation. However, they urged that it be amended to allow for more technical assistance and free legal aid to the new landowners, "in order to prevent that project from degenerating into a land-jobbing scheme for present large landholders and subsequently . . . for speculators."²⁶ The conference members also discussed agricultural cooperatives. In his committee's report, Agar endorsed producer and consumer coops, but, of the Agrarians present, only Nixon concurred; the others felt satisfied with the individual homestead approach. However, Davidson made it perfectly clear that Bankhead-Jones was wholly inadequate as a real solution to farm tenancy. Commenting on the SPC, he wrote: "Agreement is easily reached on the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Bill, because nearly all minds are used to thinking in terms of subsidies and humanitarian uplift; but other types of approach, for example, distributism and agrarianism, which view ownership from a somewhat different angle, are met with shocked incomprehension, indifference, sheer refusal to discuss."²⁷

H. C. Nixon was the Nashville Agrarian who worked hardest for passage of the Bankhead-Jones bill—and for altering it in favor of tenants. In late 1935 he wrote to Owsley:

I am working for the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Homes Corporation Bill. . . . It seems to me that we must have a more widespread farm ownership, with small farmers cooperatively organized for preservation of decent living and protection against commercial-industrial exploitation. Thus we must socialize all monopolistic large-scale enterprises, of whatever nature, in the interest of farmers, laborers and consumers. Effective steps for these agricultural and industrial changes can only be taken through government intervention, on which there should be no pussy-footing, regardless of how much government ownership may be necessary.²⁸

Nixon soon publicly expressed these views. His last statement on Bankhead-Jones, to the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy, emphasized its essentially palliative nature. He claimed that the bill would

²⁶ Francis P. Miller, ed. *Second Southern Policy Conference Report* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 5-6, 13-14; Interviews with Tate and Warren, 1976.

²⁷ Davidson, "Where Are the Laymen? A Study in Policy-Making," *American Review* 9 (October 1937): 476.

²⁸ Nixon to Owsley, 2 November 1935, Owsley Papers.

assist only 5 percent of Southern tenants. To secure tenure for the great majority of landless farmers, Nixon proposed long-term written leases, better production credit arrangements, and greater crop diversification. He again urged cooperative ownership.²⁹

In 1938, Nixon published *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*. While cautioning that the South's uniqueness precluded wholesale adoption of the same methods, Nixon approved of nineteenth-century Danish and Irish land reforms. He advocated federal loans to tenants, without which subsistence farming might well perpetuate rather than cure rural poverty. Instead of individual homesteads, Nixon proposed cooperative farm villages. The advantages were apparent: a recapturing of community spirit, a positive response to rural isolation, an alternative for Southerners that was neither city nor country but that combined the benefits of both. He praised Russian and Mexican farm village life and surveyed agricultural colonies in America. Although admiring the New Deal's rural projects, Nixon criticized them in favor of a more decentralized approach.³⁰ Of the Nashville Agrarians, Nixon was the most critical of the Bankhead-Jones bill. His increasing preference for co-operatives distanced him from most of the others, but they all fully endorsed widespread ownership and decentralization.

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union leveled many incisive criticisms at the proposed Bankhead-Jones legislation. The first was that a "change in creditor does not make a debtor independent." Generally, the union viewed it as being "uneconomic, anti-social and unworthy of our best traditions since it represents at best only a flank attack upon the problem."³¹ Despite this position, the sharecroppers' organization did not oppose Bankhead-Jones; indeed, it applauded the goal of homeownership for the rural poor. The STFU sought to modify the bill's totally individualistic orientation at the same time that it supported the legislation as one—but only one—solution to farm tenancy. After all, in terms of land reform, the Bankhead-Jones bill was the only game in town.

²⁹ Nixon, "Recommendations Regarding Tenancy Legislation, Submitted to the Special Committee on Farm Tenancy by the Southern Policy Committee," 14 December 1936, Box 11, National Policy Committee Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington. See also his *Social Security for Southern Farmers*, 5, and *Southern Policy*, 17; and Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 173–74.

³⁰ Nixon, *Forty Acres*, 48–70. Nixon and his family spent August 1939 in Mexico observing the effects of the land-reform program. He liked what he saw and drew a number of parallels between the Mexican and the Southern experiences ("On Agrarian Mexico," The Papers of Herman Clarence Nixon, in the personal possession of John T. Nixon, Nashville, Tenn.); Interview with John Nixon. We thank Mr. Nixon for allowing us access to his father's papers.

³¹ *The Sharecropper's Voice* [STFU paper], July 1935; Kester, "Statement Given Before the President's Commission on Farm Tenancy," 6 January 1936, STFU Papers. See Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 166–77.

The union criticized the bill on grounds of economic inefficiency. For the region's cotton-producing areas, the STFU predicted the demise of family-sized farming. Government attempts to establish tenants upon small individual tracts therefore made little sense.³² Kester argued that a satisfactory standard of living could not be attained through subsistence farming, which he characterized as "subsidized peasantry."³³ Due to labor-saving machinery and economies of scale, the STFU maintained that large-scale agriculture would replace the family farm, the only issue being whether the masses or the elite would benefit from the shift. In spite of its faults, the tradition of plantation collectivism possessed an "economic justification which we neglect at our peril." The STFU also criticized Bankhead-Jones for doing nothing to counteract the isolation that afflicted many rural Southerners. Moreover, from the viewpoint of society, individually owned farms could not properly deal with regional problems such as soil erosion and land retirement. The STFU leaders, then, harbored profound disagreements with the family homestead approach of the Bankhead-Jones proposal. But the union's assault on the family farm was not unrelenting. For one part of the region—the hilly South—the STFU advocated small homesteads. Here, away from the plantation, tenants usually exhibited more freedom and initiative than their Delta and plains counterparts. However, since most sharecroppers did not live in the hills, the STFU added, this approach remained quite limited.³⁴

³² Kester, "Supplement to Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Statement on Farm Tenancy," 10 October 1936, STFU Papers. This is where Kester directly attacked the Nashville intellectuals: "When social institutions reach the point of collapse there is always a strong inclination to seek a return to some previous period of greater stability. The virtues of an older 'golden age' are extolled. Thus the Southern Agrarians paint for us the picture of a return to antebellum days, with individual farm homesteads operated in a primitive manner. A halo of romanticism is set about this vision of an older and simpler epoch, and primitive inefficiency is exalted into a virtue. Many accept this agrarian philosophy without much reflection, and believe that they have reached the summit of wisdom when they advocate the small individual farm." Over the next few years, Kester broadcast this identical charge to several different audiences, including the American Economic Association (Speech, 29 December 1936, STFU Papers) and a Senate Committee ("Statement to U.S. Senate," Kester Papers). In 1930 Kester had attended the seminary at Vanderbilt and happened into a course taught by some of the Agrarians. He soon dropped the class for the ideological reasons indicated in the above quotation. Kester also studied with Nixon, whom he perceived as quite apart from the other Agrarians. The two became and remained good friends (Interview with Kester, 1976).

³³ Kester, *Revolt Among Sharecroppers*, 92. The phrase probably came from Norman Thomas, "The Sharecropper and the AAA," 3 April 1935, STFU Papers; and Thomas, *Human Exploitation in the United States* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1934), xxiv.

³⁴ Kester, "Supplement Statement"; Kester, "Statement to President's Commission"; "An Open Letter to the President of the U.S.," 20 November 1936, STFU Papers; Kester, *Revolt Among Sharecroppers*, 92–93.

The union also criticized the palliative nature of Bankhead-Jones. STFU representative Gardner Jackson charged that the proposed funding was pitifully inadequate. The better agricultural land was too expensive for the government to afford, so clients would find themselves on submarginal plots. Under the legislation, merely to check the *increase* in farm tenancy would prove "a herculean task for the government"; perhaps 5 percent of the nation's landless farmers could be helped. Kester concluded: "It is our candid opinion that lifting a few men into farm ownership and neglecting to assist the great mass of producers is in itself a vicious idea. It leaves the problem of tenancy essentially untouched."³⁵

During the 1930s, the late nineteenth-century land-reform successes of Denmark and Ireland, eventuating in widespread farm ownership, were repeatedly proposed as models for the United States. Occasionally, the STFU followed this trend, but its most extensive statements focused on the *differences* between the European situation and the South's. These included products (pork and dairy vs. cotton), size of enterprise (small farms vs. plantations), and the existence (in Denmark) of an extensive network of cooperative markets. Finally, the unique heritage of Southern slavery overshadowed all similarities to the relatively independent European peasantry. "We, in America, are confronted therefore, with a problem far more serious and hence deserving a more comprehensive and fundamental treatment."³⁶

The STFU did not hesitate to suggest what such a treatment would involve. A "communal or village farm economy based on the idea of cooperation and mutual assistance" was the union's ideal. The economic, social, and cultural virtues, it claimed, were many: greater efficiency and increased output; more technical assistance regarding crop diversification and soil erosion; group-purchased machinery; a division of labor permitting occupational choice; cooperative village life instead of rural isolation; bulk buying and selling of consumer goods at reduced costs; ability to hold on to the land even in economically troubled times; preservation of individual initiative (homes and gardens would remain personal property) complemented by group security; better schools, churches, health care, recreation and leisure activities. With its proposal for collective ownership thus developed by the fall of 1936, the STFU suggested a variety of ways to establish cooperative farms as an alternative to individual homesteads.³⁷

³⁵ Kester, "Supplement Statement"; "Statement to President's Commission," STFU Papers; U.S. Congress, House, *Farm Tenancy Hearings*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, p. 196.

³⁶ Kester, "Supplement Statement"; "A Statement Concerning Farm Tenancy," STFU Papers.

³⁷ Kester, "Supplement Statement"; "Statement to President's Commission"; "An Open Letter to the President," STFU Papers.

The union urged the Roosevelt administration to experiment. It proposed two forms of credit systems, occupancy (or long-term) leases and low-interest purchase loans, to support two types of tenure, individual and cooperative. In an open letter to President Roosevelt, the STFU voiced its clear preference for collective farming. Furthermore, the union was willing to participate "in the initial experimentation which must be made before a thoroughly sound and practical cooperative technique can be developed, valid for the American scene."³⁸ All of these land-reform proposals were summarized in Howard Kester's comment to the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy: "It is the earnest opinion of the officers and members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union that the masses of rural workers in this area would welcome an opportunity to divest this region of its abuses and to assist in moulding a new and sounder agrarian philosophy and practice."³⁹

When it was introduced in 1935, the Bankhead-Jones farm tenant bill could not get through Congress. Two years later, though, the political climate on Capitol Hill had changed. The administration needed legislative sanction for its antipoverty activities. In November 1936 (an election year), FDR appointed a Committee on Farm Tenancy whose report remained for thirty years the best government study of rural poverty in the United States. It concluded that the land-tenure system itself was at fault and recommended a variety of modifications which in effect endorsed the Resettlement Administration. In July 1937, Congress passed the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, a weak version of previous bills. In September, the Resettlement Administration was renamed the Farm Security Administration and transferred to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Headed by Southern reformer Will Alexander, it grew into a major alternative to the traditional agricultural agencies, a "poor people's USDA." During the war years, Southern con-

³⁸ Ibid. In fact, the union did help to establish a private agricultural colony. In the spring of 1936, with a couple of missionaries who had philanthropic support, twenty-four displaced tenant families (members of the STFU) set up Delta Cooperative Farm near Hillhouse, Miss. The land, however, was poor for farming, and the nearby Mississippi River flooded it in 1937. See Joseph Eaton, *Exploring Tomorrow's Agriculture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), 199-201; Daniels, *Southerner Discovers the South*, 146; Mitchell, *Mean Things*, 132-35. The STFU local there proposed to union headquarters in Memphis that every working member be "taxed" 50 cents or a dollar in order to lease or buy some *good* land to farm: "We realize that this is a monumental dream and one that is not to be achieved in a year or a decade but it is not impossible. We realize that many members do not have enough food to eat and their annual income is far below a decent living standard but we also realize that only by a great sacrifice on our part will we be able to help ourselves. We must not continue to wait for the government or any other agent to give the land back to the landless. We must do it ourselves . . ." ("Proposal from Local 146 to STFU," Undated Folder, 1937, STFU Papers).

³⁹ Kester, "Statement to President's Commission," STFU Papers.

gressmen, the federal extension service, state land-grant colleges, and the American Farm Bureau Federation combined effectively to kill the Farm Security Administration.⁴⁰

By the late thirties, the movement for reform had ended. General social criticism by American intellectuals fell off drastically after 1936, and within two years the New Deal was over.⁴¹ Such an understanding helps explain the decline of Nashville Agrarianism and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Not everyone, however, realized that the time for change was gone. Donald Davidson leveled a series of cogent critiques at the New Deal. He wrote, for example, that the Agrarian view of politics

... holds that highminded statesmanship is all but impossible where its people are corrupted or cast into abstraction and dissociation by the very character of their occupations. . . . Mr. Roosevelt seems to assume that ethical qualifications may be superimposed by an act of the will, without changing the conditioning elements that have already destroyed the human impulse to do right and impaired the American tradition of fair play.⁴²

H. C. Nixon, in contrast, reached his most reformist phase. In *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (1938), as already mentioned, he continued the campaign for land reform. Nixon also played a major role in organizing the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the region's only broad coalition of liberals and radicals.⁴³ Meanwhile, H. L. Mitchell and Howard Kester moderated STFU demands, backing the Roosevelt administration (especially Farm Security) more and more. Most remarkably, they began to speak in an almost Jeffersonian language about the land and subsistence homesteads. Kester now spent more time working for the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, including, significantly, its Friends of the Soil project. In 1938, as a member of the President's

⁴⁰ President's Committee on Farm Tenancy, *Farm Tenancy* (Washington: GPO, 1937); Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*; Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*; Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*; Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (New York: Atheneum, 1953), 88–113.

⁴¹ Two of the best intellectual histories of the thirties have sections entitled "The Decline of Radicalism, 1935–1939" and "The End of an Era: Discouragements of 1936 and After." See, respectively, Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), and R. Alan Lawson, *The Failure of Independent Liberalism, 1930–1941* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971).

⁴² Davidson, "An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal," *Free America* 2 (June 1938): 5. See also his "Agrarianism and Politics," *Review of Politics* 1 (March 1939) and *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938).

⁴³ Thomas Krueger, *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938–1948* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Mertz, *Southern Rural Poverty*, 243; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 636–39.

National Emergency Council, Mitchell proposed establishing unemployed workers on small farms so they could support themselves—an idea reminiscent of nothing so much as John Crowe Ransom's earliest back-to-the-land scheme!⁴⁴

Of course, neither the Agrarians' individual homesteads nor the STFU's cooperative farms prevailed in the United States, and both groups would be appalled by current trends. Former Secretary of Agriculture Bergland himself recently expressed concern about the structure of agriculture in the 1980s. Compared to 6.8 million in 1935, there are today fewer than 2.5 million farmers, who, with their family members, number eight million—less than 4 percent of the American population. Over half of all U.S. land in farms is not operator-owned but rented. Less than 8 percent of the households in America own all of the farmland. One percent of them (62,200 households) hold nearly one-third of the country's farmland. The largest 81,000 farms (those with gross sales of over \$200,000 in 1978), which constitute only 3 percent of U.S. farms, account for 44 percent of all sales. Both landownership and farm production, then, are extremely concentrated. In view of such figures, Bergland calls for a national dialogue on the preferred structure of agriculture.⁴⁵ The proposals of the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union can contribute to this debate. For they represent fundamentally different options to the few large individually owned and corporate-dominated farms that today substantially make up the American food and fiber system.

Still, in the thirties the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union failed to get their proposals accepted. Throughout history, Paul Conkin points out, agrarians have been "perennial losers."⁴⁶ During the Great Depression, in particular, American radicals were generally unsuccessful in their attempts to redirect society. Their failure was due in part to inadequate analysis. Whereas the crisis demanded systematic political and economic thinking, intellectuals were inclined to provide cultural criticism and moral condemnation. As alternatives to corporate capitalism, Richard Pells shows, they offered metaphors and symbols—including a transcendent agrarianism—instead of coherent social theory.⁴⁷ Yet Frank Warren argues that no

⁴⁴ Proceedings of the 4th Annual Convention, Little Rock, Ark., 25–27 February 1938; Proceedings of the 5th Annual Convention, Cotton Plant, Ark., 29 December 1938–1 January 1939; Mitchell, Testimony, 5 July 1938 and 27 May 1943; Kester, Draft Autobiographical Statement, Box 113, all in STFU Papers; Kester, "Statement to U.S. Senate," Kester Papers; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 228–32; Interviews with Kester and Mitchell, 1976.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *A Time to Choose*, 6, 46, 73, 148.

⁴⁶ Conkin, "Agrarianism," 5.

⁴⁷ Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 97–115.

movement in the United States of the 1930s could have been both politically successful and truly radical: "Different alternatives meant different forms of failure."⁴⁸ This was the tragedy of Southern agrarianism in Depression America.

But in an important sense the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union did not fail. They perceptively analyzed industrial culture, farm tenancy, and agricultural policy. Their successful analysis was directly related to a corresponding failure in "practical politics." Their very marginality—as Southerners, as agrarians—gave them insight into the underlying problems of rural America. As Populist historian Norman Pollack has indicated, no one could better criticize the industrial capitalist order than its victims.⁴⁹ Warren concurs: "Only an ideology that had an alternative vision could raise such fundamental questions."⁵⁰ This, then, was the success of the land-reform proposals of the Nashville Agrarians and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Embodied in their programs for small family farmsteads and large agricultural cooperatives, the Agrarians and the STFU offered real alternatives to the New Deal.

⁴⁸ Frank A. Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 120.

⁴⁹ Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1–2.

⁵⁰ Warren, *An Alternative Vision*, 120.